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SUBJECT: CHILE'S PRESIDENTIAL RACE: POLL POINTS TO A PHOTO
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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: According to the well-respected Center for Public Studies (CEP) poll released on June 18, Chile's presidential race is headed for a run-off between the opposition Alianza coalition's Sebastian Pinera and the governing Concertacion coalition's Eduardo Frei. Analysts agree that the second round election will be tight, with the winner emerging with 51 to 52 percent. Center-left pundits interpret the CEP poll as a positive signal for Frei because of the Concertacion's track record of pulling together before elections, the Bachelet government's record approval ratings, and Pinera's downward momentum. Center-right observers think Pinera will win because of a weakened Concertacion and voter hunger for change. One far-right pundit expressed pessimism at Pinera's chances in light of the CEP poll and cited growing divisions among conservatives, but said there is time for a turnaround. Both candidates will campaign with an eye towards attracting upstart, independent candidate Enriquez-Ominami and his supporters in the second round. END SUMMARY

POLL SHOWS TIGHT RACE, PINERA TRENDING DOWN

¶12. (SBU) The June 18 release of Chile's most respected public opinion barometer, the CEP poll, showed Sebastian Pinera -- from the center-right National Renewal (RN) party and part of the opposition Alianza coalition -- in the lead with support from 34 percent of registered voters, followed by Eduardo Frei -- from the center-left Christian Democrat (DC) party and part of the governing Concertacion coalition -- with 30 percent, and upstart, independent candidate Marco Enriquez-Ominami with 14 percent. Pinera and Frei were tied at 39 percent in the likely second round run-off. The poll also reported a record 66 percent approval rating for President Bachelet.

¶13. (SBU) Pinera's overall support has dropped seven percent since the December 2008 CEP poll (from 41 down to 34 percent), and his numbers are trending down on a variety of attributes, including his ability to solve the country's problems (from 45 down to 40 percent), sincerity (from 35 down to 31 percent), and trustworthiness (from 49 down to 44 percent). Frei's numbers met or slightly exceeded expectations in overall support. He registered gains when compared to the December 2008 poll in specific attributes such as inspiring confidence (from 50 up to 58 percent) and his preparedness to be president (from 56 up to 65 percent), where he outdoes Pinera by nearly 10 points. Higher numbers

for Frei were expected due to the fact that, during the December poll, he was only one among several possible Concertacion presidential candidates while the June poll is the first to measure support for Frei as the only Concertacion candidate.

¶ 14. (SBU) The poll confirmed that Deputy Enriquez-Ominami, who recently resigned from the Socialist Party (PS) to run as an independent, has enough support from registered voters to impact the first round, but is unlikely to seriously challenge the main candidates. Of the registered voters surveyed in the poll, 52 percent who opted for Enriquez-Ominami in the first round would vote for Frei in the second round, while 22 percent would support Pinera. Nineteen percent reported they would abstain and six percent were undecided.

ALL SIGNS POINT TO RUN OFF, BUT OUTCOME IS UNCLEAR

¶ 15. (SBU) Election observers from across the political spectrum agreed the race will remain close and result in a run-off between Frei and Pinera, with the winner taking up to 52 percent of the vote. Pundits also concurred that Enriquez-Ominami's support will decline, predicting the 36 year old parliamentarian will receive from seven to ten percent of votes in the first round. With elections more than five months away, analysts noted the campaign is only just beginning and highlighted upcoming debates and the negotiation of congressional candidate lists as key indicators to track.

¶ 16. (SBU) Center-left analysts argued the CEP poll points towards a second-round Frei victory. They believe traditional Concertacion voters will be joined by at least half of Enriquez-Ominami's supporters to deliver the election. The Concertacion has a history of being disorganized early on, but always manages to unite behind its candidate when it counts. Observers noted that Frei's agreement to end Communist Party exclusion from Congress -- by agreeing to run Communist candidates on Concertacion lists in select districts -- was a shrewd decision that could generate an important one to two percent from the far left. Record approval ratings for President Bachelet and lukewarm support from Chile's far-right will make it extremely difficult for Pinera to cobble together 51 percent in the second round.

¶ 17. (SBU) Center-right analysts disagreed and claimed the CEP poll shows signs of a Pinera victory. They highlighted the fact that the Alianza has never held a lead in the polls at this stage of the race and argued that Enriquez-Ominami's emergence underscores a hunger for change. They seized on the weakness of the Concertacion parties, noting the PS has three former members running for President. (NOTE: Candidates Enriquez-Ominami, Senator Alejandro Navarro, and Jorge Arrate are all ex-PS. END NOTE.) Several months ago, these analysts believed Pinera's only chance at winning was a first round knockout. The CEP poll revealed the possibility of a second round triumph if Pinera can rally members (believed to be lukewarm to Pinera) of the far-right Independent Democratic Union (UDI) party -- the other half of the Alianza coalition -- and attract at least one-third of Enriquez-Ominami's voters.

¶ 18. (SBU) One far-right observer expressed pessimism at Pinera's chances, stating that a hoped-for 40 percent support in the CEP poll was a psychological barrier that Pinera failed to surpass. He lamented Pinera's inability to craft a coherent campaign message. Moreover, a recent controversy over Pinera's support for government distribution of the "morning-after pill" in Chile highlighted the latent divisions within the Alianza coalition. Social conservatives doubt Pinera's commitment to defending their positions, rural conservatives think Pinera is favoring his own RN party's congressional candidates over UDI candidates, and true-blood nationalist conservatives have always questioned Pinera's credentials because of his opposition to Pinochet during the

1988 plebiscite. The growing divide between Pinera and the various conservative constituencies will make it difficult to garner campaign support and generate strong conservative turn-out in the first and second rounds.

SUPPORT FOR ENRIQUEZ-OMINAMI REFLECTS DISAFFECTION

¶9. (SBU) Analysts agreed that the young, media-savy, inde-pendent Enriquez-Ominami polls well among voters who are disaffected by political parties and turned off by the other candidates. These voters are primarily Concertacion members, the far-left, and newly politically engaged young people. Enriquez-Ominami's candidacy is perceived by political observers as a product of generous media coverage. One analyst even argues, with numbers in hand, that the politically conservative media holding company that owns El Mercurio increased its coverage of Enriquez-Ominami in April and early May in order to impact the CEP poll (and thus, the argument goes, generate more competition for Frei). This coverage, combined with the candidate's open discussion about controversial issues such as gay marriage and the "morning-after pill", explains his surprising rise in the polls.

¶10. (SBU) Analysts noted that Enriquez-Ominami never expected to be in this position, so he has little to lose. His inexperience, undetermined policies, and lack of institutional support make it unlikely that he can seriously challenge Frei and Pinera. The CEP poll showed that 58 percent of registered voters have already decided they will not vote for him. Still, he continues to pick up steam, the latest being Humanist and Green party endorsements and the addition of his father, prominent Senator Carlos Ominami, to his campaign after resigning from the PS on June 27. Analysts acknowledged that both Frei and Pinera will campaign with an eye on Enriquez-Ominami voters for the second round.

COMMENT

¶11. (SBU) While the elections are still five months away, the challenges facing the main candidates are clear. Pinera must attempt to simultaneously rally his base and court Enriquez-Ominami voters. He especially needs the UDI to actively campaign and get out the vote. Frei will try to focus all of his attention on Pinera for the first round, then attempt to unite the Concertacion and pull disaffected voters back to fold for the second round. Even if Enriquez-Ominami has benefited from generous press coverage, his numbers reflect legitimate dissatisfaction with Chile's political parties and candidates. He has almost no chance of winning, but his unexpected candidacy has added color to an otherwise predictable campaign. END COMMENT.

SIMONS